Report: Water near Memphis coal ash dump ranked among worst in the country for arsenic contamination

By: Micaela Watts

Memphis' Sand aquifer is sitting below one of the most polluted coal ash landfills in the country, and levels of arsenic found in the nearby groundwater are 350 times higher than what is considered safe, according to a study by the Environmental Integrity Project.

The report analyzed industry data available to the public for the first time, as a result of an Obama-era coal regulation that took effect in 2015.

Ten power plants across the nation were identified as having the highest levels of pollutants found in groundwater near coal ash ponds. The Tennessee Valley Authority's Allen Fossil plant is one of them.

The Allen Fossil plant's three coal-powered units retired in 2018.

The study, released Monday, follows a recent report from the U.S. Geological Survey that revealed this contaminated groundwater is "hydraulically connected" to the Memphis Sand aquifer, the city's source for drinking water.

The arsenic levels are found in the shallow aquifer. Memphis' drinking water comes from a deeper source. Separating the two is a thin layer of clay.

However, a report released Friday by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) acknowledges the clay barrier separating the shallow aquifer from the deeper Memphis Sand aquifer is absent in a testing site near the coal ash pond.

TVA is adamant the plume of contaminated groundwater is not moving toward the deep aquifer where drinking water is derived from.

TVA, operators of the Allen plant, also say there is no evidence the drinking water supply contains the high levels of arsenic.

Further, TVA says, Memphis Light, Gas & Water has been unable to find evidence of high concentrations of arsenic in the city's drinking water.

TVA says they have already begun the work of finding a solution that meets federal guidelines.